

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 229

SO 027 380

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 TITLE Issues of Education and Reproductions of "Artistic" Images.
 PUB DATE 96
 NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and Education of Artists (10th, New York, NY, October 16-18, 1996).
 PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Art; Art Appreciation; *Art Education; Critical Viewing; Elementary Secondary Education; Fine Arts; *Illustrations; Visual Literacy
 IDENTIFIERS *Art Reproductions

ABSTRACT

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Issues of Education and Reproductions of "Artistic" Images

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PETER SMITH

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Abstract

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Past uses of reproductions in schools and mass media publications are described, along with political, economic, and aesthetic issues raised by such usage. The presentation focuses on concerns associated with present and future educational use of reproductions, whether electronic or some other form. Issues of selectivity and aesthetics are discussed.

Issues of Education and Reproductions of "Artistic" Images

Many of us are still at that point in trying to intellectually fuse art and technology described by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy about seven decades ago:

Men discover new instruments, new methods of work, which revolutionize their familiar work habits. Often, however, it is a long time before the innovation is properly utilized, it is hampered by the old; the new function is shrouded in traditional form. The creative possibilities of the innovation are usually slowly disclosed by these old forms, old instruments, and fields of creativity which burst into euphoric flower, when the innovation which has been preparing finally emerges. (1987, p27)

About 100 years ago new and improved technology made possible the widespread distribution of inexpensive reproductions. Since American mass education has always required cheapness over quality, the new low price made possible a visual revolution in the school room. Washington by Gilbert Stuart or Washington Crossing the Delaware by Leutze began to be hung above every chalkdust laden blackboard in the United States, mostly in sepia tones. Indeed, sepia reproductions were deemed morally superior to the vivid colors of commercially designed and produced chromolithographs (Stankiewicz, 1985). Perhaps this was a pre-echo of a later ironic comment that "artistic" (i.e. prestigious) crafts were beige. Or perhaps it reflected a lingering fear that whatever was immediately sensuous was suspect.

This availability of reproductions made possible the rise of Picture Study in the public schools. On the positive side this movement was a democratizing attempt to bring what was thought to be the best in culture to the masses, to bring an art appreciation experience hitherto restricted to the wealthy, albeit in a pale reflection of the in-the-flesh grand tour. Other, perhaps not so best agendas included Americanization (learning to venerate Washington as a secular deity), grinding work disguised as dignity (peasants by Millet), and piety (again Millet, as in The Angelus or, interestingly, various Landseer dogs being faithful). To quote the author of a Picture Study text:

Picture Study in the Grades [the title of the text] aims primarily to develop in the children of our schools an appreciation of the great masterpiece of art so that they may know the joy that comes from such an appreciation and so that their ideas may be influenced by the patriotism, the piety and the beauty which the great artists of different ages have given the world.
(Neale, 1927, n.p.)

We may smile a little at this sort of rhetoric but one of the arresting features of the Picture Study Movement was the faith of its advocates in the power of the image. Would that we, now bombarded by images, had such faith and devotion.

The rise of such magazines as Life and Look coincided with the fading away of Picture Study as an important school practice. Of course the modernist insistence on no narrative in art, also weakened the Picture Study insistence on pictures telling stories. But my opinion is that many of my generation (mostly in my case) got their art appreciation in the pages of Life rather than in school. Life had great photos and occasional features on the whole Sistine Chapel, the Gozzoli frescoes in the Medici Palace, or Giotto's Arena Chapel. I still have these particular sections in my files and take them out to recall how wonderful they seemed before I had seen the real thing and before mass reproduction lost that deadish color I suppose was brought on by the use of three colors plus black in color printing.

Life even made it possible to look at nudes and deduce that there was a world out there not being mentioned at home or in school. True, it was difficult to see a connection between Michelangelo's Adam and myself, but I could see where my father and Michelangelo's God might equate. Since Life was out of school, I was free to make my own connections. I could make my individual associations, to day dream about Titian's Sacred and Profane Love -- it took me awhile to get it straight that the one with clothes on was the profane love -- or to try to copy the fascinating horrors of Dore's illustrations for The Inferno.

Life enabled me to do an undirected, uncensored, sometimes clandestine art education. I appreciated and manipulated images shamelessly, in every sense. Despite being schooled in an era when hairy-chested individualistic genius, free from all historical burdens was the supposed god of the art world, I lived a secret life as an art reproduction hacker.

I never visited an art museum until a high school art teacher took me to one. New York City students and teachers may roll their eyes in horror at this bizarre deprivation, but even as late as 1987 I knew of a case where a graduate of a major university confessed to my wife she had never been in an art museum. You hear a lot of figures put out about museum attendance, but numerous people still do not go look at paintings or sculpture. At best many people have only been exposed to reproductions of paintings.

Of course art museums do not equal art in all its manifestations and I am mindful that in our postmodern condition we must take seriously the traditional forms created outside the European-derived concept of art and we must attend to vernacular art and mass art and much else. However, for 20 minutes sake, I want to talk only about reproductions of museum type art objects. I also do not want to venture into computer generated imagery beyond saying every art and design student needs to be involved. I do think we are near the point when the necessity of doing computer created or manipulated imagery is a given--from kindergarten to the MFA.

To return to my central concern, reproductions are nothing new in art learning. Since the Renaissance we know much about Greek sculpture from Roman copies or hand-made reproductions. Northern European artists learned a lot about Italian Renaissance art through prints, or through copies made by travelers to Italy, not the least

of them Rubens. Plaster casts of masterpieces were a mainstay of academies for generations. Lantern slide reproductions got into history of art lectures early on after that discipline became a college subject.

Reproductions in some cases were regarded as the equivalent of the original object. Indeed, bronze casts of hand-modeled clay statues are regarded as the art object, not the thing the artist modeled. Multiple casts can raise some difficulties in this. Rosalind Krauss in The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths has dealt with this issue in her usual aloof and ascerbic manner. Is an exhibit of Rodin's bronzes a display of original art objects testifying to Rodin's original and fecund genius, or a show of factory-made items, similar in some respects to design furniture?

However, to turn to something never intended by its maker to be reproduced, is a reproduction of a Vermeer the same as the original thing? Walter Benjamin would have much to say about reproductions diminishing the aura of the original, but I have to wonder if my aura is diminished by countless photos of me on post office bulletin boards? We do know certain peculiar traits of reproductions. A postcard reproduction of Mona Lisa with a mustache drawn on it is a separate art work from the thing displayed behind glass in the Louvre. The postcard, with or without Duchamp's double entendre caption, is hardly a visual art object. It is an intellectual game strategy to get us to consider the nature of exalted art objects in general.

To move from the very profane to the sacred, an icon may be almost entirely hidden by a metal cover because the icon's functional value rests in the concept it embodies, not its visual appearance. Even a reproduction glued onto a stiff backing will do, unless we are talking about rare icons "not by human hands" in which the divine hand's aura somehow adheres to the object.

In a somewhat similar sense, a reproduction is not entirely the equivalent of the art object, but verification that the original has been indexed as an art object --to use Timothy Binkley's terminology (1977). If the Shorewood Company lists in its catalog a reproduction of a painting by Peter Smith that can be purchased for classrooms, the work has been designated an art work, been indexed.

Certain educational researchers (Hardiman & Zernich, 1984) have claimed that students get from reproductions the same information they get from originals. This seems to me so clearly false and wrongheaded that I hardly know where to attack such research. Initially I jump to the conclusion that the researchers asked only questions that could be gained from a documentation. If you pose questions about Hamlet that can be gleaned from Cliff's Notes you can conclude that Cliff's Notes is the same experience as reading Hamlet, or better still, seeing Hamlet adequately performed.

Do scale and surface texture and the physicality of paint mean nothing? I have in mind Turner's Blue Lights and Rockets in the Clark Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. What reproduction duplicates its illusion of inner light glowing out towards us, or the perfect rightness of its size? Assuredly, someday it may be copied precisely in all its physical qualities and reproduced endlessly, but so far, it remains a unique piece. Of course its present context in a temple of art, rather than stuck up on a bulletin board to pass by everyday, adds to its aura.

Walter Benjamin's classic essay on reproduction, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has no reference to the work of artists who seemed to produce work in defiance of reproduction. Rauschenberg's bed is almost a taunt to reproducers. Makers of installations seem to say clearly that their work can be documented, but not reproduced.

Need I rehearse the falsifications of slide or film or electronically reproduced images? I had no real grasp of the lumbering clumsiness of Courbet's The Artist in His Studio until I visited the D'Orsay. Because of its horizontal orientation, reproductions of it in books or slides are always quite small and disguise the physical grossness of the real thing. This physical obesity confirmed my opinion that Courbet had a very coarse sensibility. "Almost a German," as I put it to my long-suffering wife as we trudged and trudged down the painting's length.

On the other hand, I wish I could get my hands on a really big reproduction (or a slide that could be projected on a big screen) of Mark Tansey's The Triumph of the New York School. Of course size would be important, the smallness of the reproduction of it in the 1991 edition of Art Through the Ages (De La Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick, 1991, p1080) annoys me. The artist used Courbet-like bombast, mixed with elements from Velasquez's The Surrender of Breda to produce a masterpiece of art historical wit, surpassing even Tom Wolfe's The Painted Word. In Tansey's case the ideas are so important that a reproduction can convey a lot of information. Not all, but a lot. The slovenly gruntness of The New York School of the post World War II era is conveyed by army fatigues plus standing in mud puddles. The French ethos is communicated by having the artists all in elegant World War I uniforms that make them all look like Adolph Menjou. The worth of the reproduction has to do with what the artist wanted to convey, but if the art work's message is deeply intertwined with its physical elements, no reproduction yet devised will suffice. Even Tansey's hilarious comment is, after all dependent on scale (in part a parody of abstract expressimists' use of size of canvas as a psychic battleground on which to wage an aesthetic campaign) as well as defiant use of narrative after an era of anti-narrative art theory.

Now the primrose path of reproductions used in educational institutions leads one inevitably to the hell or heaven or purgatory or limbo of computer programs about art objects. Some of these have obvious flaws: computer copies of slides or reproductions rather than of original art objects. Remember Plato's condemnation of visual art as a copy of a copy of a copy? What would Plato make of these reproductions of copies of originals? But even if the image on the computer monitor was somehow generated directly from the original, don't we still have the same falsifications of slides?

Agreed some of the CD-ROM programs attempt to answer all the questions you always wanted to ask about particular art works. Indeed, they sometimes answer a lot of questions you never wanted to ask. Some computer programs are "interactive"¹ and on the level of information retrieved quick and clean--tidy, neat, precise, antiseptic and so forth.

That leads to two final concerns:

First, as in all reproductions, who controls choice? Agreed that the objects in museums were chosen by or for a certain social class, yet a walk about a museum still gives an individual, particularly a student a chance to see or deduce alternatives to the official line. When I was a student at Pratt in the 1950s we got past Arthur Wesley Dow pseudo - Bauhaus doctrine about design principles and art, yet we could sneak to Manhattan to the galleries, to MoMA and the Whitney and other places to form our subversive personal opinions.

The people who see in technology a dangerous potential for control are right. However, when they say this means we should reject technology in education about the arts, they should go swim up Niagara Falls, or rent a cabin in Wyoming for a long rest. It's a case of becoming an intelligent user or a flat earther.

However -- to get to my second point -- the use of reproductions by whatever means, but most especially reproductions used in computer instructional programs should be preceded by at least one question about the essential nature of the art object as it has been conceived up 'til the electronic age. Does the art work as a unique object still have a function? Perhaps one answer is that its silence and its lack of interaction is a large part of its valuable function. Like nature, an art work really is, but it does not speak. It is an intentional object as we know even from casual experience, but it refuses to dictate its meaning or by itself lift the veil to give us an epiphany. A great artist knows how to say what she has to say while refusing to explain. The artist respectfully invites the viewer to engage in reconstruction approaching co-creation of meaning.

We must bring our minds, hearts, souls, life experiences -- all that we know consciously or unconsciously -- to the art object. It has been noted many times that the aesthetic experience and the religious experience have great similarities. A Rothko painting or Grunewald's Christ Rising from the Tomb may blur any distinction between the two experiences. Both the artist and the viewer must somehow cope with the variable of unconscious meaning. The unspoken and unspeakable meaning of the image has been often spoken of. For example, the Jungians and archetypal psychologists have a lot to say about the power of the image.

Interaction via computer reproductions and information files is not the same as the effortful and creative work done by the perceiver of the original art work. Perhaps my stance is similar to the person who finds a ride even in a Mercedes down the information superhighway can never replace a stroll among the ruins of Fountains Abbey, or a turn about the grounds of Storm King. Superhighway? Yes, for certain specific things. Ambulation of body, soul and mind among originals for many, many other attractions -- a more resonant "Yes!"

Endnote

1. During the presentation one audience member made the comment that he felt the label "interactive" for computer programs was a highly inaccurate term. He said he didn't see students interacting, but just sitting in total isolation and passively in front of computers.

1

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